WORLD CHRONICLE

UNITED NATIONS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DURATION: 28′ 00" TRANSCRIPT AS BROADCAST

PROGRAMME: "WORLD CHRONICLE"

GUEST: Lowell Flanders, President
U.N. Staff Committee

JOURNALISTS: Bhaskar Menon, PTI-TV, India
Raghida Dergham, Al-Hayat, London
Mikhail Kochetkov, TASS

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

SYNOPSIS

UN STAFF COMMITTEE

Lowell, Flanders, President of the United Nations Staff Committee, assess present relations between the employees of the world organization and the 159 Member States which are, collectively, their boss. He lays special emphasis on the security and independence of the international civil service in doing its job without the unlawful arrest and detention that has occurred in scores of cases.

"WORLD CHRONICLE" is produced by the Information Products Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, N.Y. 10017, USA.

Executive Producer: Boris Holtzman
Director: Livingston Hinckley
Production Assistant: Diane Barkley
Eloisa Ugalde

Programme No. 414 Recorded on 11 December 1990

VOICE From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **WORLD CHRONICLE**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns and this is **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

Hostages have of course been very much in the news lately in connexion with the Gulf crisis and there is great relief now that they've been mostly freed and repatriated. It's far less well-known that the United Nations, central to so much of the Gulf drama, has itself, over many years, been subjected to having scores of its staff around the world detained against their will and the Organization's strong objections.

In the forefront of those protests has been the U.N. Staff Committee currently led by its President, Lowell Flanders. Mr. Flanders is our guest today on **WORLD CHRONICLE**. He will be interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters by: Bhaskar Menon of PTI-TV of India; Raghida Dergham of Al-Hayat of London; and Mikhail Kochetkov of TASS.

Welcome to **WORLD CHRONICLE**, Mr. Flanders.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Flanders, I understand that about 145 members of the United Nations International staff have disappeared, in some cases been killed, in other cases detained, even tortured, since these are international officials serving an international organization and presumably are politically neutral persons, why is it that they've been subjected to these kinds of terrors?

FLANDERS: This is of course a very good question that we ask repeatedly. I think one of the reasons is that there are more occasions of civil strife in the world. The U.N. is very much these days more in the forefront of the activities that are taking place and for that reason our staff members are more exposed perhaps than they have been in the past and so there are more opportunities really for staff members to be subject to the same kinds of things that other citizens in the world are subject to.

LITTLEJOHNS: But in some cases Mr. Flanders I understand that governments themselves have been responsible for detaining U.N. staff?

FLANDERS: Yes, that's very true. We have a number of cases in Ethiopia, as a good example, where the government has in fact detained staff members. Other countries as well. We have quite a list where they have been responsible for arresting staff members, putting them in prison, many times without trial.

LITTLEJOHNS: In -- I don't know if one may use the phrase -- the bad old days, but at any rate before the changes in Poland, I believe the Polish Government was also responsible for detaining one of the staff?

FLANDERS: Yes, we had a UNDP staff member as a matter of fact who was for about five years in prison and it was the subject of a rather widespread staff protest at the time.

LITTLEJOHNS: What was the problem there? What had she done or was alleged to have done?

READEX FICHE

FLANDERS: She was alleged to have engaged in anti-state activities of one kind or another. She was on her way to Mongolia to take up an assignment with the United Nations and as she was passing through her home country she was arrested and she was put on trial but under conditions that we were of course not satisfied with and the way the trial was handled.

LITTLEJOHNS: And she was finally released and she's back with the U.N. staff?

FLANDERS: She was finally released and she did return for a time to the United Nations but because of internal difficulties and I think complaints from the government at that time she really never was properly integrated back into the service of the United Nations. I think that one of the problems that we have in fact had over time is when staff members are released from these situations to get them fully integrated back into the service of the United Nations and she never did. She took agreed termination and left the United Nations.

LITTLEJOHNS: So although she did her five years the government was still not satisfied? The government at that time?

FLANDERS: I think there was probably some sort of deal worked out between the administration and the government at that point in terms of the fact that if the government let her go that she would not be re-employed with the United Nations on a full-time basis.

MENON: Lowell, one of the things about the international civil service or the U.N. staff is the image prevalent in some countries, especially in the United States, that the bureaucracy is a vast, slow-moving outfit which is overpaid and underworked, when you come across this image in the media, people reflect this image at you, how do you react?

FLANDERS: I think it just reflects a lack of information basically about the kinds of work that our staff do, what sort of activities they're involved in, what kind of staff we have. I think if you get to know about the international civil service, about the United Nations, you have a little bit better idea about the range of activities that the U.N. is involved in. I know very frequently when I go out to parties or occasions people want to know if I'm an interpreter and some people have the impression that everybody at the U.N. is either a translator or an interpreter but we really have a wide range of jobs at the United Nations -- everything from accountants to mail clerks -- and there is a wide range of course in any organization of how people perform their duties. But I've been representing the staff of the United Nations for quite a few years now on various occasions and I think we have a very good staff, I think we have a hard-working staff, we have a dedicated staff and I wish that everybody had that appreciation that I do.

MENON: Would you say that it stands up well in comparison with other big bureaucracies?

FLANDERS: Well, you have a slightly different kind of complex of things. We have an international organization and I don't think there is probably any organization in the world that really compares with the type of staff that we have in terms of having people from all different nationalities, with different language abilities, different backgrounds so I think given the complexities of our organization it works fairly well in comparison to other types.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Flanders, some while ago there was some criticism in one of the committees of the General Assembly by the United States delegate about the work loads that have been

established for U.N. staff and it was suggested that perhaps productivity was not as high as it might be, what's your response to that?

FLANDERS: As I said in another interview that I gave, I think this reflected some lack of understanding on the part of people making those criticisms about the kind of texts for example that U.N. staff members have to work with. I don't know if you've seen some of the resolutions that come out of the various political committees and how they're all marked up and scratched up and this type of thing so that when these kinds of texts get to our typing pools they have a different situation that they're working with. They're working with several different languages, you have a different situation than somebody who is typing in English working in a company say outside for example.

DERGHAM: This sort of defence that I've just heard from you is rather typical but it makes you appear as if you are the one who is crying "victims". You feel that you are victimized by the system though the inefficiency is to be blamed on the people who work for the system as well as the system itself. Why do you want to liberate yourself from any responsibility as staff?

FLANDERS: Oh, I'm not trying to liberate myself from any responsibility. Obviously, whatever the problems are in the Secretariat we have to take responsibility. If there are criticisms we try to and I would be I think the last one to shirk from criticism. I think it's very healthy for people to be scrutinizing what the United Nations is doing, what the staff is doing but I think also that there is a defence to be made for the staff of our organization. I don't accept automatically

whatever criticism is made is valid. I think there has to be a response as well on behalf of the staff and at the same time recognizing that there may be validity to criticism.

DERGHAM: For someone who has been familiar with the United Nations for quite a number of years, probably 14 years, I have found that the staff -- again I want to emphasize the staff angle because you represent the staff -- that you have not come to terms with the new realities of the world to be reflected here in the work of this huge organization which is supposed to reflect the new world order. It is a lot of self-pity and there is a lot of involvement in self-promotion. When and how, if that is not true, will you be meeting the new challenges of the new world order for the organization as is now?

FLANDERS: Well, maybe you could explain to me what the new realities are?

DERGHAM: For example the new relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union reflecting and giving the United Nations as an organization a new role in international affairs.

FLANDERS: I think as a matter of fact the staff, through the Staff Union and through the people that I represent, have taken quite a leading role in meeting these new realities as you call them because we were the first I believe and have been in the forefront of those for example calling for an end to secondment practices which has been one of the things that we feel has been holding back the organization. I think we are responding to these so-called new realities in a very constructive way. In fact, I think in some ways we've been ahead of the new realities.

LITTLEJOHNS: By secondment policies you're referring to the former practice of the Soviet Union of sending people to the United Nations for short-term contracts?

FLANDERS: I'm referring to a practice that's not just by the Soviet Union but it was being practised by most of the countries in the East European bloc of sending people for fixed-term contracts on rotation and changing those staff members every four to five years and thereby perpetuating what we think is really a way for governments to control who is appointed to the Secretariat.

LITTLEJOHNS: Not allowing them to become independent, career officials of the U.N.?

FLANDERS: That's right.

KOCHETKOV: The Soviet Foreign Ministry announced that next year they will stop the practice of illegally taking money from their employees in the United Nations to their Mission so now glasnost came to the United Nations and we know about these facts but do you think that there is some mechanism of influence on the Soviet citizens working in the United Nations from their Mission?

FLANDERS: This is one of the new realities that was referred to. I think last year, as a matter of fact, in the Staff Union we had written and complained to the Secretary-General about the fact that several Chinese staff members complained to us that they were forced to pay back part of their salary to the Chinese Mission and we also got documentary evidence of that. That was the first we had and we were the first to call for stopping that sort of practice and I was very pleased to hear that the Soviet Union has now agreed

also to stop that sort of practice although we are yet to see that it's fully implemented and to have concrete evidence that it's being implemented because we do have a variety of Soviet staff members who are right at this moment in fact contesting their employment status with the United Nations, because at one point in time they refused to make those payments and now they're out of a job and we have really a case with the administration for their reinstatement because they themselves took the first step to stop this practice. So we hope that there will be, on the part of the Soviets at least, a real commitment to stop this practice and that all other governments will.

KOCHETKOV: The point is that some U.N. members applied for permanent contracts with the United Nations and the U.N. Secretariat asked first for the approval of the Soviet Mission, the Ukrainian Mission, the Byelorussian Mission, before they made a decision.

FLANDERS: Yes, that's true and I think this is one of the practices that we've protested against that in fact employment at the United Nations should not be dependent on the approval of your government and this is one of the practices that has gone on that we feel limits the possibilities of the Secretariat to really perform the task that it's supposed to perform by having so many governmental appointees.

LITTLEJOHNS: The programme is **WORLD CHRONICLE**. Our guest is Lowell Flanders, President of the U.N. Staff Committee.

MENON: Lowell, in the discussions so far the question of the independence of the international civil service has been mentioned and the threat to it seen as mainly coming from the socialist or Eastern European bloc but isn't it true

that the threat to the independence of the U.N. staff comes mainly from the countries that own and run the organization, mainly the Western countries, because they control the organization and they play hardball when it comes to controlling what the organization does and how it does it? Is that observation true?

FLANDERS: Obviously those who are paying the bill will try to also call the tune in terms of what the Secretariat does. I don't know how successful they always are in that but definitely the major powers who pay the bills have a very big influence on what is done but in the Administrative and Budgetary Committee where decisions are made on these kinds of questions it is done by consensus and it's not always possible for say the U.S. to control every decision that is made. I'll give you one example. There was this controversy I think you're aware of, of the building programme in Addis Ababa which many people objected to and I think the major powers were objectors to that but that programme is going forward. We think unfortunately, but nevertheless, the building programme is going forward so some of the major powers are not able to control everything that goes on although I would admit that their influence is obviously quite strong.

LITTLEJOHNS: When you say we, in that case you mean the Staff Committee? Why would the Staff Committee not want a building programme in Ethiopia to go forward?

FLANDERS: Well, it's not that we don't want a building programme to go forward in Ethiopia but there are certain priorities we think. Staff members are being held prisoner.

LITTLEJOHNS: In Ethiopia?

FLANDERS: Yes, and we had even reports of one of the staff members, Ghennet Mebrahtu who has been tortured and we feel that before any building programmes take place in any country that is holding U.N. staff members those staff members should be released and so for us it is a matter of concern and priority that this be done.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ethiopia is of course a member of the Security Council.

DERGHAM: I just wanted to have a clarification here. How many of those are being held by Ethiopia and I also want to second what you said. It's peculiar because Ethiopia sat on the Security Council making decisions on the security of the world and the international peace of the world for two years so how many detainees or hostages are there of U.N. employees in Ethiopia?

FLANDERS: Currently, we have two imprisoned but several have died under the current regime in Ethiopia and others have been chased out of the country for whatever reason -- these were staff members who had to leave the country -- so this has been an ongoing problem in Ethiopia. In fact we raised this last year in the Fifth Committee and there was a very big protest against the Staff for having done so by some Member States who wanted this building programme to go forward.

DERGHAM: While we're still on the issue of the detainees or hostages there's a number of what, 135 total of U.N. employees held in different countries?

FLANDERS: 145 currently.

DERGHAM: 145. Alright, so how would you categorize them? Are they detained mostly by governments or by groups and to a great extent what is the common accusation against these U.N. employees? Is it sabotage, is it political activities, is it spying?

FLANDERS: The greatest number in fact are being held by Israel. These are UNRWA workers, Relief and Works Agency local employees, who are detained. We have 87 under detention at the present time. They are not terrorists as I keep repeating, they are basically gardeners, workers, drivers, teachers, people who are working with the Palestinians.

LITTLEJOHNS: Are they Palestinians mainly?

FLANDERS: Some of them are. They are from the Middle East. They are not all Palestinians but many of them are.

DERGHAM: But they are UNRWA, they are United Nations Relief and Works Agency, they are employed by the United Nations and held by the government of Israel?

FLANDERS: Right.

DERGHAM: And what is being done about that by the Secretariat, by you the staff? We haven't really heard much about this.

FLANDERS: In our statement to the Fifth Committee each year the staff has an opportunity to address the decision-making bodies and we have brought this up regularly. We have pointed out that Israel is one of the major countries holding U.N. staff members and the Secretary-General also has made interventions on this point but there seems to be very

little leverage against the Israeli government in these particular cases but there is a wide variety of other countries also that are holding people, U.N. staff members, and the basic charge against them seems to be some sort of anti-government activity. This seems to be one of the most common complaints. They are basically political prisoners.

DERGHAM: Michael referred to those people as hostages at the very beginning, would you also call these detainees, are they hostages in Israel?

FLANDERS: In all of their cases I don't know why they've been detained but to a certain extent I think they're being used as a type of hostage. There is no reason to hold U.N. employees that we can find. These people have been employed to carry out the functions of the United Nations in various parts of the world and there should be no reason for holding them.

MENON: What does the Secretary-General say when you raise this issue with him?

FLANDERS: The Secretary-General is always quite sympathetic and responsive and he's concerned. As you well know, we had an exhibit recently that was opened in the General Assembly Hall and he was there. He always says the right things on the issue but we sometimes feel that he is not, and the administration doesn't push it quite as strongly and as vigorously as they should.

KOCHETKOV: The question is that all the Soviets living in New York are limited in their movements by a 25-mile zone. Now U.N. staff personnel, the Soviet citizens, are also

limited. This is part of the old thinking, part of old practices, are you supposed to do something to break these limits?

FLANDERS: That's a very good question. We pointed out in our report to the General Assembly this year that there are 16 nationalities on a list by the U.S. government where their movements for private travel are limited to a 25-mile radius of Columbus Circle. Iraqi nationals working at the U.N. were recently added to that list of staff members whose travel is restricted and we have protested also on this point because we think it's an interference with the independence and security of the international civil service. It's another form of interference by a government in the operations of the United Nations. Now many of these staff members whose travel is restricted have lived in this country, in the United States, for years. They've been working at the U.N. for 15, 20 years and particularly the Iraqis nobody ever said that they were doing anything wrong or that they posed a security threat up until we had this problem recently so we think this is an undue interference in the operations of the Secretariat. We've protested against it.

MENON: What do you see as the future of the international civil service?

FLANDERS: If we want to see the future of this civil service we should look to the past I believe and what the staff would like, what the Staff Union is aiming for, is to get back to the original concept of an independent international civil service that the founders of the Organization came up with. That we would be free from outside political influence, that we would be appointed not because we were put forward by some government but on the basis of our qualifications and our merit,

that we would be recruited from all countries of the world but it wouldn't be based on government nominations. And I hope with the new realities, if I may say that, we will be moving more and more in that direction, that we will finally establish a Secretariat that is free from political influence and these kinds of things that we've seen.

DERGHAM: Who is resisting you most in accomplishing such aims?

FLANDERS: I think the governments obviously, the Member States who have an interest in keeping the Organization within their control and gamut, they're the people who are most resistant to change.

DERGHAM: But which governments have got that much power? Can you specify any particular .... we know the five permanent members for example are powerful in the Security Council, in this particular case who are the powerful governments?

FLANDERS: Well, there are always influential governments and influential people. It changes from time to time in some regards depending on who is representing the government and how much they get around, talk to people but it is clear. As an example recently, various decisions are taken within the political bodies and we were trying to get the right of the staff simply to be able to go in and talk and sort of present our views in informal consultations and that sort of thing and Member States resist that. They don't want to hear the views of the staff on some of these issues.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Flanders, you spoke a little while ago about governments who are requiring their nationals in the U.N. Secretariat to pay money back to the governments from their salaries but in fact there are some governments who are supplementing salaries, what are you doing about that?

FLANDERS: This has been a big issue for us because on the one hand you have certain countries, to get back to your question, that say the civil service is overpaid and some of those very same governments that are saying we are paid too much turn around and pay their nationals working here a supplement. We've had some admitted cases of this where that has been done and we find this to be a very demoralizing aspect because that means that some staff members are being paid more to do the same work than others.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Flanders, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

Our guest has been Lowell Flanders, President of the U.N. Staff Committee. He was interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by: Bhaskar Menon of PTI-TV of India; Raghida Dergham of Al-Hayat of London; and Mikhail Kochetkov of TASS.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

****

Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to: **WORLD CHRONICLE**, United Nations, Room S-827, New York, New York 10017, USA.

WORLD CHRONICLE is broadcast worldwide and features guests whose work is concerned with major global issues. This programme is a public affairs presentation of this station from United Nations Radio and Television.

Additional informational material about the United Nations can be obtained by writing to the Public Inquiries Unit, United Nations, Room GA-57, New York, New York, 10017, USA or the UN Information Centre in your country.